

CRUISING TRAVEL

The Carlton Hotel is a hip place to chill in Miami Beach. **Getaway, 7H**

10 REASONS I love TO CRUISE THE SEA solo

She decided years ago not to let other people's availability keep her on dry land. What she discovered in a dozen countries along the way is that cruising alone really floats her boat.

By GINA WILCOX
Special to The Palm Beach Post

I could feel the stress lift away from my body and a wave of relaxation wash over me as I sipped a cool drink on my balcony and watched a spectacular sunset at sea — alone.

Yes, you read that right. Alone. It may not be the most conventional thing to do, but cruising solo — especially for those of us lucky enough to live in South Florida — is an easy and often fairly inexpensive way to relax and get away from it all. And it's one of my most treasured guilty pleasures.



Wilcox

So why cruise solo when there are so many other ways to go — ways that include well, other people?

Family, reunion cruises, romantic cruises and cruises with the kids are all great, but some of the things I love most about cruising are difficult if not impossible to do when accompanied by spouses, significant others, parents, siblings, children, even friends. For example ...

1. Sleeping until noon in total peace and quiet.

I'm sorry, but you just can't do this when you're not traveling solo. Even if whoever you are traveling with goes off to do their own thing and promises to leave you alone, if you're sharing a stateroom with someone, lights will be turned on and doors will be banged shut on their way out.

2. Space to spread out.

No matter how much you splurge for an upgraded stateroom, unless you're in the presidential suite, space is tight on cruise ships. Drawer space and especially bathroom space is almost always too tight for two and unfathomably tight if traveling with a couple of kids in the same cabin. But when you cruise solo, the space is more than ample to unpack everything you bring so you aren't digging in suitcases each time you need something.

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3. Your schedule, your timetable.

Feel like eating lunch at 11 a.m.? Do it! Change your mind on the way to the buffet line and decide to go rock climbing instead? No problem. If you are traveling with someone (or multiple people), try doing that without a 20 minute committee meeting!

4. Spa on speed dial.

If you haven't experienced spa treatments on a cruise ship, you don't know what you're missing. This is a luxury that many never get a chance to experience when cruising with friends, family members and kids. Spa treatments aren't cheap. But when you only have to pay for just yourself, it makes it a lot easier on the pocketbook to really indulge in some serious pampering. On the last cruise I went on solo, I went to the spa every day for something — massages, facials, manicures. Ladies, you can't put a price tag on pure bliss.

5. Meeting new people.

This may sound strange, but think about it: If you are traveling with friends or a significant other, your time (and conversation) is primarily focused on who you are traveling with. But when you cruise solo, any interaction with others is about being social and striking up conversations with new people. I've met some fascinating characters on cruises. Some end up just being interesting enough to chat with during the course of the cruise, while other people I've met on cruises I've ended up staying in contact with for years afterward.



Staff illustration by STEVE LOPEZ

CHEFS AHOY! CRUISE LINES TURN GALLEYS INTO GALLERIES

5 cooking-at-sea programs

By SPUD HILTON
San Francisco Chronicle

Here's a sampler platter of culinary-tour and cooking-school offerings at sea this year:

1. Regent Seven Seas, partnered with the famed Le Cordon Bleu culinary institute, offers food-and-wine programs and workshops run by the cooking school on Seven Seas Mariner (April 7 and April 30, May 27, Sept. 18) and Seven Seas Voyager (June 9,

Sept. 9). During the summer in the Mediterranean, Seven Seas Navigator will host celebrity chefs: former White House executive chef Walter Scheib (June 7) and Cindy Pawlcyn of Mustards Grill in the Napa Valley (June 21). Visit: www.rssc.com.

2. Silversea Cruises will offer 12 trips in 2008 that feature the Viking Cooking School, with

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Kids attend a cooking class on Holland America Line. This is just one activity offered at the \$13 million Culinary Arts Centers, state-of-the-art show kitchens installed on each of the line's 13 ships.

WONDERS DOWN UNDER



Princess Cruises' Diamond Princess is shown at port in Sydney, Australia (the famous opera house is in the background). Starting this month, the Sapphire takes over the Auckland-to-Sydney cruise.

A 12-day New Zealand-to-Australia cruise offers lush mountains and picturesque waterfronts.

By MARIBETH MELLIN
Fort Worth Star-Telegram

I once felt absolute ambivalence toward Australia and New Zealand. Just couldn't wrap my mind around the size and latitude. And I couldn't deal with trying to cover such vast territories in a matter of weeks.

Then the thought of a cruise floated along. I could board a ship in Auck-

land, cruise New Zealand's North and South Islands, cross the Tasman Sea to Australia, dip into Tasmania, end up in Sydney — and unpack only once.

A plan formed. My husband was willing to endure the 13-hour flight from Los Angeles if we could stay in the southern hemisphere for at least three weeks.

He'd always wanted to explore the islands, coastlines

and reefs of what I've come to call A-NZ.

We booked a 12-day Diamond Princess Auckland-to-Sydney cruise, with time on both ends for further explorations. The adventure was rewarding on several levels — and came with a few lessons in flexibility.

Our journey began in

See NEW ZEALAND, 4H ▶

Fairy penguins, koalas and kangaroos — oh my! On Australia's Kangaroo Island, **Page 4H**



If you go

■ Princess Cruise Lines' Sapphire Princess (nearly an exact sister to the Diamond) is taking over the Australia-New Zealand 12-day itinerary from January to April. Rates start at \$1,299 per person for an inside cabin and \$2,495 per person for cabin with balcony. The Sapphire begins the season with a 20-day Bangkok-to-Sydney cruise including Vietnam and Malaysia. The line is also establishing a year-round presence in Australia with the Sun Princess, offering nine- to 22-day itineraries in the South Pacific. www.princess.com.